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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8422

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000897

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, INR/EAP

DEPT PASS TO USDA

DEPT PASS TO USAID/AME/ USAID/FFP

BANGKOK FOR FAS, REO

KOLKATA FOR ECON OFFICE

NEW DELHI AND DHAKA FOR AID MISSION, ECON OFFICE

PACOM FOR FPA

TREASURY FOR OASIA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/19/2018

TAGS: [EAGR](#) [FAID](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: BURMA: FOOD INSECURITY IN CHIN STATE PERSISTS;  
FAMINE UNLIKELY

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Classified By: Economic Officer Samantha A. Carl-Yoder for Reasons 1.4  
(b and d)

Summary

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¶11. (C) Although food insecurity in northern Chin State has become more acute during the past six months due to crop destruction caused by a burgeoning rat population, the situation has not deteriorated into famine, according to World Food Programme (WFP) Country Director Chris Kaye. WFP, with funding from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), will launch a new assistance program in Chin State in December, providing food and livelihoods assistance to up to 60,000 beneficiaries who currently lack adequate food supplies. WFP and its implementing partners will continue to monitor the situation and will alert the international community to new developments. End Summary.

Rats Affecting Food Security in Chin State

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¶12. (SBU) The northern portion of Chin State, located in western Burma along the India and Bangladesh borders, has been affected by a burgeoning population of rats, which are attracted to the flowering of a specific type of bamboo that blooms once every 50 years. The rats eat the flowers and then destroy other crops in their quest for additional food. In the late 1950s, an estimated 15,000 Burmese died from

famine when the rat population destroyed local food supplies.

According to WFP Country Director Chris Kaye, WFP has been monitoring the rat infestation since January 2008, and, working with international partners on the ground, conducted an assessment in April 2008. The assessment was limited because the area in which the bamboo flowers is located at high altitudes where there are no roads. According to Kaye, it takes days to hike to affected locations. While WFP found no evidence of famine-like conditions in northern Chin State, it did observe that the rat infestation exacerbated the region's food insecurity problems. (Note: Chin State is the only Burmese region that does not produce enough rice to meet the needs of its 500,000 residents. The Chin rely on cereals to supplement their dietary needs. End Note.)

¶3. (C) Based on the initial assessment, WFP shifted some funds from its Protracted Relief and Recovery Operations (PRRO) to provide food assistance to northern Chin State. However, local community leaders told WFP partners that they did not want free food; instead, they preferred food-for-work programs. Kaye explained that some community leaders had negative experiences with previous food distributions and told him that many Chin left their villages, abandoned their livelihoods, and became wholly dependent on the distributions.

¶4. (C) Kaye admitted that Cyclone Nargis diverted attention away from the Chin State rat problem, but said that WFP and its implementing partners continue to monitor the situation. He emphasized that there was still no evidence of famine or famine-like conditions in northern Chin State, contrary to recently released media reports. In August, WFP, based on information from its implementing partners and UNDP that food insecurity in northern Chin State was becoming more acute,

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released a proposal requesting additional funding to address the rat infestation. Kaye told us that DFID provided an initial USD 1 million for the project, which will provide assistance to up to 60,000 beneficiaries. WFP will begin providing assistance in December.

¶5. (C) Kaye confirmed that WFP and its partners will continue to monitor the situation and will report to the international community. He emphasized that future funding for Chin State will come from the PRRO, which is currently under-funded. He noted that the PRRO mechanism provides WFP with increased flexibility to respond quickly to developing crises. Kaye will meet with donors to request additional funding for the PRRO.

Comment

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¶6. (C) WFP is best placed to ascertain conditions in Chin State affected by the rat infestation. We have seen no information contradicting Kaye's assessment that, despite a worsening food security situation, there is no sign of famine or famine-like conditions. WFP assumes 60,000 potential beneficiaries will need assistance, but the difficulty in accessing the remote areas makes it a challenge to determine how many people are affected. While we still do not know the full extent of the problem in Chin State, it appears exile reports of famine are likely exaggerated.

VAJDA